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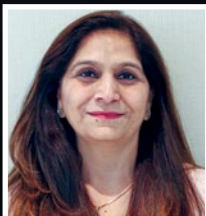
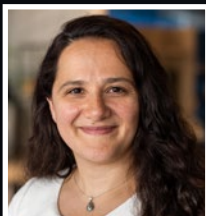
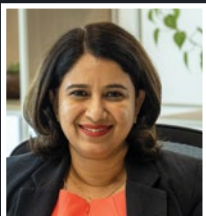
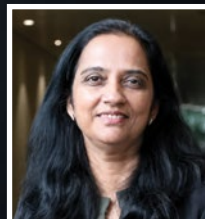
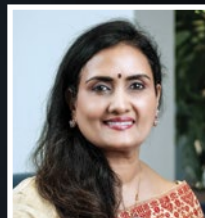
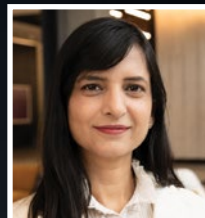
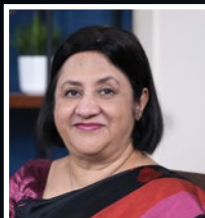
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How technical depth, ownership, and influence are redefining women's leadership.



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Gen Z women are speaking up, but workplaces still need to catch up

Young women are entering technology with confidence and clearer expectations, yet bias, weak career pipelines and uneven leadership cultures still hold many back.

By Deepali Jain



Pallavi Saha has run the same experiment for six years without quite meaning to. In 2020, she co-founded RigBetel Labs, a robotics company in Pune, with two male batchmates. Most of her clients are men in their fifties, plant managers who have spent entire careers on factory floors, and a technical disagreement with one of them tends to end the same way.

“Oh, okay, let me talk to your co-founder,” they will say. Or, more bluntly: “You will not get this, I’ll go talk to them.”

It is not her male co-founders doing this, she is careful to point out. “They are always there to push me towards the front.” The redirection comes from across

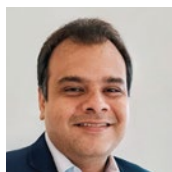
the table, from clients who reach past her for a man almost on instinct. Seven out of 10 conversations go well, by her own count. It is the other three that linger.

“If it was a man, it would be 10 out of 10,” she said.

Multiply that arithmetic across an industry, and you begin to see what is changing, and what stubbornly is not, for the generation of women entering India’s technology workforce.

A WORKFORCE THAT HAS FLIPPED

Sunil Bablani, Director for IT and GCC at Great Place to Work, has watched the shift unfold inside the companies his organisation audits.



Gen Z women no longer ask how to fit in. They expect purpose, trust, fairness, and a workplace that enables them to give their best.

- Sunil Bablani

Director – IT & GCC, Great Place to Work



Confidence may be individual, but inequality is institutional. Gen Z women are questioning who designed the table and who gets to redesign it.

- **Dr. Madhu Mandal**

Assistant Professor, XLRI Delhi

“When we looked at the representation of Gen Z females in the tech sector, that has gone up by 18% in the last three years,” he said. “They almost represent 44% of the overall female population in the tech sector.” Across the technology workforce, Gen Z’s share has climbed from 20% in 2023 to 34% today.

What has changed is not just the headcount, Bablani argued, but the question employers are being asked.

“No longer are they saying, what can I do to fit in the workplace? The question has flipped. What is it that you can do to create a workplace where you enable me to give my best?”

Pay parity, pride in the work, and team spirit barely register as differentiators anymore. “Today, Gen Z women are saying these are table stakes.”

What they are negotiating for is meaning: why the task matters, what the job adds up to five years on, and whether they trust the person managing them enough to give more than what is asked.

WHERE THE CONFIDENCE COMES FROM

When you ask the women living this, rather than the executives studying them, the picture gets layered.

Priyanka, two and a half years into a career as a software engineer, remembers arriving with more doubt than confidence.

“Even before someone else could throw this at me, I had self-doubt that I am a minority, I may not know things, because that is the kind of conditioning you get while growing up,” she said. “I did not have anyone in technology in my entire family.”

Her seniors, she is quick to add, were genuinely decent. Yet there were technical sessions where she would ask a question and watch the answer land on the male colleague beside her.

Her colleague Sahana has watched managers assume that women with families cannot take on

more. “They were passed over for opportunities they actually deserved,” she said.

Their teammate Yamini recognises another familiar double standard: behaviour that would pass without comment from a man becomes “too assertive” or “too judgy” in a woman.

Twenty-four-year-old Deeksha, a mechanical engineer at a multinational manufacturing firm, offered a smaller example of what shifts when women say what they need. Enough women raised the issue of menstrual leave with human resources that a policy followed.

Asmitha, 22, is one of four women at a robotics start-up. “I do see a lot of women speaking up compared to the previous generation,” she said.

THE THEORY BENEATH THE CONFIDENCE

Dr. Madhu Mandal, a professor at XLRI Delhi who studies gender in organisations, thinks the framing of “confident Gen Z women” misses the more interesting question underneath it.

“Why does women’s ambition continue to attract attention when ambition in men is viewed as a leadership trait? Why are women described as vocal when men are described as assertive?” she asked.

“The more important question is not why Gen Z women are demanding more, but why society is surprised when half the workforce begins to expect what should have been available all along.”

She traces the pattern to sociologist Joan Acker’s work on “gendered organisations”, the idea that promotion ladders and leadership templates were built around a worker with few caregiving duties. Women were expected to bend around a structure never designed with them in mind. Gen Z, in Mandal’s view, is one of the first generations pushing back at scale.

“Confidence is an individual attribute, whereas inequality is institutional,” Mandal said.



The gap is not only in hiring. Deep-tech pipelines still lose women before curiosity, ambition, and technical confidence translate into leadership.

- **Pushpa Annamalai**

Co-founder, Elimai.ai



Women founders are still talked past, even when they lead the technical conversation. Progress will matter when all 10 out of 10 rooms listen.

- Pallavi Saha

Co-founder and CEO, RigBetel Labs

A woman can walk into a salary negotiation feeling entirely sure of herself and still collide with bias, stereotypes around technical competence, and exclusion from informal networks where opportunities are created.

“Gen Z women are no longer asking only for a seat at the table,” she said. “They are questioning how the table itself has been designed.”

THE PART NOBODY WANTS TO SAY OUT LOUD

This is where the story gets uncomfortable.

Pushpa Annamalai spent years in venture capital before starting her own artificial intelligence (AI) company, Elimai.ai. She has pitched to investors who did not bother making eye contact with her.

Yet her more unsettling observation concerns her own hiring pipeline. She interviews roughly equal numbers of men and women for technical roles; by the final round, the numbers quietly reshuffle.

It is not that women lack talent, she said, but that too few arrive with curiosity and ambition built early enough to survive the process.

Saha has watched something similar inside her small team. Of the three women she hired over six years, all eventually moved on. She is careful not to make this about gender broadly.

Her concern is that some Gen Z employees, men and women alike, are highly skilled but less willing to take sustained responsibility.

“They will wrap up a two-hour task in half an hour. And then, I do not feel like working today,” she said.

She is equally wary of how the comfort with saying no can become a shield for not working.

Neither founder questions the progress being made. But in AI, automation, and robotics, the pipeline of women staying and growing has yet to match the optimism around them.

“If I am to count women in deep technology,” Saha said, “I would probably be able to count them on my fingers.”

WHAT EMPLOYERS KEEP GETTING WRONG

Bablani hears a version of this concern from employers constantly and thinks it is less a generational problem than a leadership failure dressed up as one.

“One misconception is that Gen Z women will not put in discretionary effort, will not go above and beyond, and will do the bare minimum,” he said.

For him, it comes down to purpose. People are more willing to put in extra effort when they understand why it matters and when leaders give them a reason to care.

“If I do not understand why, what, and how this is having an impact, I will not go above and beyond.”

Recognition matters too. “Is this going to help me in my career growth? And do I trust my leadership enough to go above and beyond?”

Where AI fits in, Bablani thinks, is less threatening than most assume. As AI lowers technical barriers, what will matter more is judgement: creativity, critical thinking, and the ability to make ethical decisions.

WHERE THIS ACTUALLY LANDS

Priyanka MB, a psychologist and founder of Inspiron Psychological Wellbeing Centre, sees a generational rewrite happening underneath everything described so far.

Millennials, in her account, grew up believing success meant deferring everything else for some distant payoff. Gen Z does not want to inherit that bargain.

“They are actively questioning, reshaping, and redefining what success, safety, and the future of



Self-belief can take women to the door, but organisations must change what waits beyond it through fair systems, safer cultures, and humane leadership.

- Priyanka M.B., Founder and Chief Psychologist,
Inspiron Psychological Well-Being Centre Private Limited

“THERE IS STILL THE PROBLEM OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME- THE PRIVATE DOUBT THAT PERSISTS DESPITE COMPETENCE.



work should look like,” she said. “Work is just a part of life, not life itself.”

This generation has inverted the order: “For me to achieve that, first I need to be okay too.”

Much of what looks like a confidence problem, in her clinical view, is two problems running in parallel.

One is imposter syndrome, the private doubt that persists despite competence. The other is upskilling at a pace no earlier generation matched, a cohort exposed to information, learning, and AI beyond any other generation.

The two forces produce different women from the same age group.

“You will see one segment achieving beyond limits,” she said. “You will see another segment intimidated by these circumstances.”

Priyanka is also cautious about celebrating Gen Z’s readiness to leave an unhealthy workplace. Some of it, she suggested, may be conflict avoidance disguised as boundary-setting, in workplaces where people have yet to learn how to navigate disagreement.

WHAT TECHNOLOGY WILL NOT FIX

AI keeps surfacing in Priyanka’s sessions, useful in many ways, but also changing how people think.

“I am glad people have someone to use as a sounding board. But where do you draw that line?” she asked.

Her concern is less about the technology than about what constant convenience does to decision-making and memory.

Bablani reaches a similar conclusion from another direction: as AI lowers technical barriers, judgement, creativity, and ethics will become more valuable than coding alone.

“It is going to be between that AI agent and the human,” Priyanka said. “What is really going to win is values, humane nature.”

There is no neat ending because there is no single problem to solve. Gen Z women are arriving with greater confidence, stronger voices, and fewer reservations than many before them. Yet confidence alone cannot rewrite workplace cultures, reshape leadership, or erase unconscious bias.

AI may remove some old barriers while creating new ones. But the next decade of technology will be shaped not just by the tools these women use, but by the women designing them.

As Mandal puts it, getting a seat at the table was never the destination. The real question is who gets to redesign it, and whether the next generation of women will inherit workplaces that no longer ask them to adapt before they belong. ¹⁰

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